

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

DEVON WILLIAMS,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:23-cv-124

v.

Honorable Jane M. Beckering

UNKNOWN KETCHIM et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Plaintiff has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (ECF No. 7.) Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's complaint for failure to state a claim against Defendant Maculey. The Court will also dismiss, for failure to state a claim, Plaintiff's official capacity claims, as well as his claims for declaratory and injunctive relief, against Defendants Ketchim and Klien. Plaintiff's individual capacity Eighth Amendment excessive force and failure to intervene claims for damages against Defendants

Ketchim and Klien remain in the case. The Court will also deny Plaintiff's motion to appoint counsel. (ECF No. 2.)

Discussion

I. Motion to Appoint Counsel

Plaintiff has filed a motion to appoint counsel, arguing that counsel is warranted because he has a "limited knowledge of the law" and because the issues involved are complex. (ECF No. 2, PageID.7.) Plaintiff states that he "had to rely on another inmate to draft this foregoing motion as well as his complaint." (*Id.*) Indigent parties in civil cases have no constitutional right to a court-appointed attorney. *Abdur-Rahman v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, 65 F.3d 489, 492 (6th Cir. 1995); *Lavado v. Keohane*, 992 F.2d 601, 604–05 (6th Cir. 1993). The Court may, however, request an attorney to serve as counsel, in the Court's discretion. *Abdur-Rahman*, 65 F.3d at 492; *Lavado*, 992 F.2d at 604–05; *see Mallard v. U.S. Dist. Ct.*, 490 U.S. 296 (1989).

Appointment of counsel is a privilege that is justified only in exceptional circumstances. In determining whether to exercise its discretion, the Court should consider the complexity of the issues, the procedural posture of the case, and Plaintiff's apparent ability to prosecute the action without the help of counsel. *See Lavado*, 992 F.2d at 606. The Court has carefully considered these factors and determines that, at this stage of the case, the assistance of counsel does not appear necessary to the proper presentation of Plaintiff's position. The Court, therefore, will deny Plaintiff's motion to appoint counsel.

II. Factual Allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the St. Louis Correctional Facility (SLF) in St. Louis, Gratiot County, Michigan. The events about which he complains, however, occurred at the Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility (IBC) in Ionia, Ionia County, Michigan. Plaintiff sues Warden Matt Maculey, and Corrections Officers

Unknown Ketchim and Unknown Klien. Plaintiff indicates that he is suing Defendants in their official and personal capacities. (ECF No. 1, PageID.1.)

Plaintiff alleges that on February 2, 2020, he was involved in a fight where three other inmates attacked him. (*Id.*, PageID.2.) Officers arrived on scene “in order to control the inmates and get the fighting to cease.” (*Id.*) Plaintiff claims that he was “distraught and hyped up due to being in fear of losing his life” and aimed a “retal[i]atory kick in the head or face towards one of his attackers.” (*Id.*, PageID.3.)

Plaintiff had blood in his eyes, but identified Defendant Ketchim as the officer who threw Plaintiff to the ground after Plaintiff’s hands were cuffed behind his back. (*Id.*) Defendant Ketchim then punched Plaintiff in the head and face more than seven times. (*Id.*) Plaintiff “made eye contact with Defendant Klien” and asked for help, but Defendant Klien “just stood there and watched the beating take place.” (*Id.*)

Plaintiff was taken to the hospital, “where it was determined that due to Defendant Ketchim’s brutal blows, Plaintiff’s jaw was broken.” (*Id.*) Plaintiff contends that he also had a broken nose and had to undergo surgery on his eye, nose, and jaw. (*Id.*) Plaintiff alleges that he “now suffers from headaches and blurred vision” because of Defendant Ketchim’s use of force. (*Id.*)

Based on the foregoing, the Court construes Plaintiff’s complaint to assert Eighth Amendment excessive force and failure to intervene claims. Plaintiff seeks declaratory relief, compensatory and punitive damages, and other relief as the Court “deems just, proper, and equitable.” (*Id.*, PageID.4.)

III. Failure to State a Claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails “to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*,

550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Id.*; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Id.* at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not ‘show[n]’—that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Id.* at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

A. Official Capacity Claims

Plaintiff indicates that he is suing Defendants in their official and personal capacities. (ECF No. 1, PageID.1.) Although an action against a defendant in his or her individual capacity intends to impose liability on the specified individual, an action against the same defendant in his or her official capacity intends to impose liability only on the entity that they represent. *See Alkire v. Irving*, 330 F.3d 802, 810 (6th Cir. 2003) (citing *Kentucky v. Graham*, 473 U.S. 159, 165 (1985)). A suit against an individual in his official capacity is equivalent to a suit brought against the governmental entity: in this case, the MDOC. *See Will v. Mich. Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989); *Matthews v. Jones*, 35 F.3d 1046, 1049 (6th Cir. 1994). The states and their departments are immune under the Eleventh Amendment from suit in the federal courts, unless the state has waived immunity or Congress has expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute. *See Pennhurst State Sch. & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 98–101 (1984); *Alabama v. Pugh*, 438 U.S. 781, 782 (1978); *O'Hara v. Wigginton*, 24 F.3d 823, 826 (6th Cir. 1994). Congress has not expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute, *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979), and the State of Michigan has not consented to civil rights suits in federal court. *Abick v. Michigan*, 803 F.2d 874, 877 (6th Cir. 1986). In numerous opinions, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit has specifically held that the MDOC is absolutely immune from a § 1983 suit under the Eleventh Amendment. *See, e.g., Harrison v. Michigan*, 722 F.3d 768, 771 (6th Cir. 2013); *Diaz v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, 703 F.3d 956, 962 (6th Cir. 2013); *McCoy v. Michigan*, 369 F. App'x 646, 653–54 (6th Cir. 2010).

Plaintiff seeks declaratory relief, as well as compensatory and punitive damages. (ECF No. 1, PageID.4.) Official capacity defendants, however, are absolutely immune from monetary damages. *See Will*, 491 U.S. at 71; *Turker v. Ohio Dep't of Rehab. & Corr.*, 157 F.3d 453, 456

(6th Cir. 1998). The Court, therefore, will dismiss Plaintiff's claims for monetary damages against Defendants in their official capacities.

Although damages claims against official capacity defendants are properly dismissed, an official capacity action seeking injunctive relief constitutes an exception to sovereign immunity. *See Ex Parte Young*, 209 U.S. 123, 159–60 (1908) (holding that the Eleventh Amendment immunity does not bar prospective injunctive relief against a state official). The United States Supreme Court has determined that a suit under *Ex Parte Young* for prospective injunctive relief should not be treated as an action against the state. *Graham*, 473 U.S. at 167 n.14. Instead, the doctrine is a fiction recognizing that unconstitutional acts cannot have been authorized by the state and therefore cannot be considered done under the state's authority. *Id.*

Importantly, “*Ex parte Young* can only be used to avoid a state’s sovereign immunity when a ‘complaint alleges an ongoing violation of federal law and seeks relief properly characterized as prospective.’” *Ladd v. Marchbanks*, 971 F.3d 574, 581 (6th Cir. 2020) (quoting *Verizon Md. v. Pub. Serv. Comm’n of Md.*, 535 U.S. 635, 645 (2002)). Plaintiff, however, is no longer confined at IBC, where he avers that the individual Defendants are employed. The Sixth Circuit has held that transfer to another prison facility moots a prisoner’s claims for declaratory and injunctive relief. *See Kensu v. Haigh*, 87 F.3d 172, 175 (6th Cir. 1996). Underlying this rule is the premise that injunctive relief is appropriate only where plaintiff can show a reasonable expectation or demonstrated probability that he is in immediate danger of sustaining direct future injury as the *result* of the challenged official conduct. *Los Angeles v. Lyons*, 461 U.S. 95, 102 (1983). Past exposure to an isolated incident of illegal conduct does not, by itself, sufficiently prove that the plaintiff will be subjected to the illegal conduct again. *See, e.g., id.; Alvarez v. City of Chicago*, 649 F. Supp. 43 (N.D. Ill. 1986); *Bruscino v. Carlson*, 654 F. Supp. 609, 614, 618 (S.D. Ill. 1987),

aff'd, 854 F.2d 162 (7th Cir. 1988); *O'Shea v. Littleton*, 414 U.S. 488, 495–96 (1974). Plaintiff is now incarcerated at AMF, and the individual Defendants are not employed at that facility. Plaintiff, therefore, cannot maintain claims for declaratory and injunctive relief against the individual Defendants, and such claims will be dismissed.¹

B. Individual Capacity Claims

1. Defendant Maculey

Although Plaintiff specifically names Warden Maculey as a Defendant, he does not make any factual allegations against Warden Maculey. It is a basic pleading essential that a plaintiff attribute factual allegations to particular defendants. *See Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 545 (holding that, in order to state a claim, a plaintiff must make sufficient allegations to give a defendant fair notice of the claim). The Sixth Circuit “has consistently held that damage claims against government officials arising from alleged violations of constitutional rights must allege, with particularity, facts that demonstrate what each defendant did to violate the asserted constitutional right.” *Lanman v. Hinson*, 529 F.3d 673, 684 (6th Cir. 2008) (citing *Terrance v. Northville Reg'l Psych. Hosp.*, 286 F.3d 834, 842 (6th Cir. 2002)). Where a person is named as a defendant without an allegation of specific conduct, the complaint is subject to dismissal, even under the liberal construction afforded to *pro se* complaints. *See Frazier v. Michigan*, 41 F. App'x 762, 764 (6th Cir. 2002) (dismissing the plaintiff's claims where the complaint did not allege with any degree of specificity which of the named defendants were personally involved in or responsible for each alleged violation of rights); *Griffin v. Montgomery*, No. 00-3402, 2000 WL 1800569, at *2 (6th Cir. Nov. 30, 2000) (citing *Salehpour v. Univ. of Tenn.*, 159 F.3d 199, 206 (6th Cir. 1998)) (requiring allegations of personal involvement against each defendant); *Rodriguez v. Jabe*, No. 90-1010, 1990 WL 82722,

¹ To the extent Plaintiff seeks declaratory and injunctive relief against Defendants in their individual capacities, such claims will also be dismissed for the reasons set forth above.

at *1 (6th Cir. June 19, 1990) (“Plaintiff’s claims against those individuals are without a basis in law as the complaint is totally devoid of allegations as to them which would suggest their involvement in the events leading to his injuries.”). Plaintiff fails to even mention Warden Maculey in the body of his complaint. His allegations fall far short of the minimal pleading standards under Fed. R. Civ. P. 8 (requiring “a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief”). For that reason alone, all individual claims against Warden Maculey, therefore, are properly dismissed.

Plaintiff suggests that he has named Warden Maculey as a Defendant because he “was in charge of the prison [as] a whole.” (ECF No. 1, PageID.2.) Government officials, however, may not be held liable for the unconstitutional conduct of their subordinates under a theory of respondeat superior or vicarious liability. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676; *Monell v. New York City Dep’t of Soc. Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978); *Everson v. Leis*, 556 F.3d 484, 495 (6th Cir. 2009). A claimed constitutional violation must be based upon active unconstitutional behavior. *Grinter v. Knight*, 532 F.3d 567, 575–76 (6th Cir. 2008); *Greene v. Barber*, 310 F.3d 889, 899 (6th Cir. 2002). The acts of one’s subordinates are not enough, nor can supervisory liability be based upon the mere failure to act. *Grinter*, 532 F.3d at 576; *Greene*, 310 F.3d at 899; *Summers v. Leis*, 368 F.3d 881, 888 (6th Cir. 2004). Moreover, § 1983 liability may not be imposed simply because a supervisor denied an administrative grievance or failed to act based upon information contained in a grievance. *See Shehee v. Luttrell*, 199 F.3d 295, 300 (6th Cir. 1999). “[A] plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official’s own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676.

The Sixth Circuit repeatedly has summarized the minimum required to constitute active conduct by a supervisory official:

“[A] supervisory official’s failure to supervise, control or train the offending individual is not actionable *unless* the supervisor either encouraged the specific incident of misconduct or in some other way directly participated in it.” *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300 (emphasis added) (internal quotation marks omitted). We have interpreted this standard to mean that “at a minimum,” the plaintiff must show that the defendant “at least implicitly authorized, approved, or knowingly acquiesced in the unconstitutional conduct of the offending officers.”

Peatross v. City of Memphis, 818 F.3d 233, 242 (6th Cir. 2016) (quoting *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300, and citing *Phillips v. Roane Cnty.*, 534 F.3d 531, 543 (6th Cir. 2008)); *see also Copeland v. Machulis*, 57 F.3d 476, 481 (6th Cir. 1995) (citing *Rizzo v. Goode*, 423 U.S. 362, 375–76 (1976), and *Bellamy v. Bradley*, 729 F.2d 416, 421 (6th Cir. 1984)); *Walton v. City of Southfield*, 995 F.2d 1331, 1340 (6th Cir. 1993); *Leach v. Shelby Cnty. Sheriff*, 891 F.2d 1241, 1246 (6th Cir. 1989).

Here, Plaintiff fails to allege any facts suggesting that Defendant Maculey encouraged or condoned the conduct of his subordinates, or authorized, approved, or knowingly acquiesced in that conduct. Indeed, he fails to allege any facts at all regarding Defendant Maculey’s conduct. Conclusory allegations of supervisory responsibility are insufficient to demonstrate that Defendant Maculey was personally involved in the events described in Plaintiff’s complaint. Conclusory allegations of unconstitutional conduct without specific factual allegations fail to state a claim under § 1983. *See Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678–79; *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. Plaintiff’s individual capacity claims against Defendant Maculey will, therefore, be dismissed.

2. Defendants Ketchim and Klien

The Court has construed Plaintiff’s complaint to assert an Eighth Amendment excessive force claim against Defendant Ketchim and an Eighth Amendment failure to intervene claim against Defendant Klien. As set forth above, Plaintiff contends that after the fight was stopped and his hands were cuffed behind his back, Defendant Ketchim threw him to the floor and punched him in the face and head more than seven times. (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) Plaintiff alleges further

that he asked Defendant Klien for help to stop the use of force, but that Defendant Klien “just stood there and watched the beating take place.” (*Id.*)

Plaintiff’s claim must be analyzed under the Supreme Court authority limiting the use of force against prisoners. This analysis must be made in the context of the constant admonitions by the Supreme Court regarding the deference that courts must accord to prison or jail officials as they attempt to maintain order and discipline within dangerous institutional settings. *See, e.g., Whitley v. Albers*, 475 U.S. 312, 321–22 (1986).

Not every shove or restraint gives rise to a constitutional violation. *Parrish v. Johnson*, 800 F.2d 600, 604 (6th Cir. 1986); *see also Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 9 (1992) (holding that “[n]ot every push or shove . . . violates a prisoner’s constitutional rights” (internal quotations omitted)). On occasion, “[t]he maintenance of prison security and discipline may require that inmates be subjected to physical contact actionable as assault under common law.” *Combs v. Wilkinson*, 315 F.3d 548, 556 (6th Cir. 2002) (citing *Pelfrey v. Chambers*, 43 F.3d 1034, 1037 (6th Cir. 1995)). Prison officials nonetheless violate the Eighth Amendment when their “offending conduct reflects an unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.” *Williams v. Curtin*, 631 F.3d 380, 383 (6th Cir. 2011) (internal quotation marks omitted); *Bailey v. Golladay*, 421 F. App’x 579, 582 (6th Cir. 2011). Given Plaintiff’s allegations, the Court concludes that he has set forth a plausible individual capacity Eighth Amendment excessive force claim against Defendant Ketchim.

Moreover, an officer is liable for another officer’s use of excessive force where the defendant “‘observed or had reason to know that excessive force would be or was being used’ and ‘had both the opportunity and the means to prevent the harm from occurring.’” *Burgess v. Fischer*, 735 F.3d 462, 475 (6th Cir. 2013) (emphasis in original) (quoting *Turner v. Scott*, 119 F.3d 425, 429 (6th Cir. 1997)); *accord Alexander v. Carter ex rel. Byrd*, 733 F. App’x 256, 265 (6th Cir.

2018); *Partin v. Parris*, No. 17-6172, 2018 WL 1631663, at *3 (6th Cir. Mar. 20, 2018). Here, Plaintiff explicitly alleges that Defendant Klien was present during the use of excessive force by Defendant Ketchim and did nothing to stop it. Plaintiff, therefore, has set forth a plausible individual capacity Eighth Amendment failure to intervene claim against Defendant Klien at this time.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Defendant Maculey will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court will also dismiss, for failure to state a claim, Plaintiff's official capacity claims, as well as his claims for declaratory and injunctive relief, against Defendants Ketchim and Klien. Plaintiff's individual capacity Eighth Amendment excessive force and failure to intervene claims for damages against Defendants Ketchim and Klien remain in the case. The Court will also deny Plaintiff's motion to appoint counsel. (ECF No. 2.)

An order consistent with this opinion will be entered.

Dated: March 7, 2023

/s/ Jane M. Beckering
Jane M. Beckering
United States District Judge